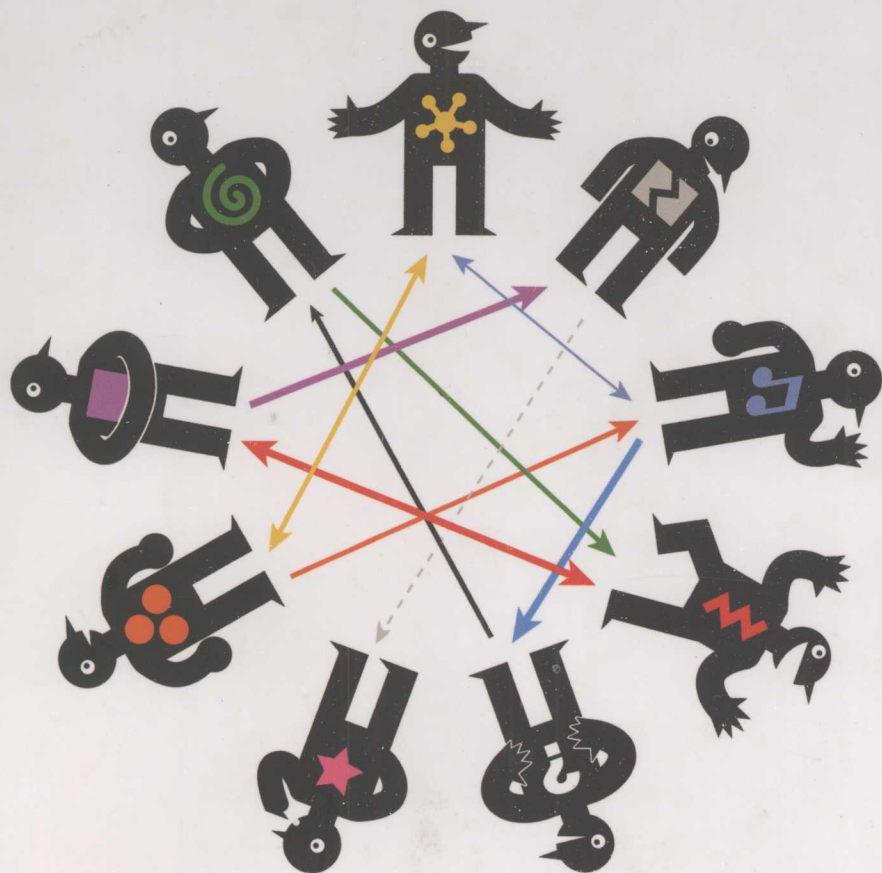


FROM WORKPLACE TO **PLAYSPACE**



Innovating, Learning, and Changing Through Dynamic Engagement


PAMELA MEYER

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Through Dynamic Engagement**

藏書章

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Preface

A few years ago I was sitting in a faculty meeting at the university where I teach. The meeting hadn't yet started when a former student, whom I hadn't seen in many years, walked in and sat next to me. I was happy to see him, and he shared that since taking my class, he had finished his undergraduate degree, gone on to complete his master's, and, in addition to teaching (as a fellow visiting faculty member), was now living out one of his dreams: working as a volunteer chaplain for the state police. As I was expressing my delight in all that had transpired for him since our first meeting, he interrupted me and said, "Well, it all started with that class I took with you." "Really?" I inquired. "How so?" He pointed down the hall, still remembering the classroom where he learned improvisation: "I found out what kind of man I am in that room."

The marathon meeting was starting, and I didn't have time to ask him more about his experience learning improvisation, but his story has stayed with me. Our conversation inspired me to collect and reflect on more stories of such significant and transformative learning and eventually to do in-depth research on the spaces people create that make room for transformation and innovation.

Playspace Research

Over the years I have witnessed adults' fear of improvisation and creativity transform into excited anticipation and delight at their own and their colleagues' capacity for collaboration, discovery,

and playfulness. Adding to the story of my former student, now a teaching colleague, I have heard numerous reports of the ways people's improvisation experience in the facilitated sessions spilled over into other areas of their lives, including the busy professional who reported that she began playing with her three-year-old first thing in the morning rather than hurrying her into the morning routine, as she usually had, not because she felt she "should," but because *she* wanted to start the day playing too; the commuter rail traffic manager who was able to avert a head-on train collision within minutes by improvising with his team; the factory worker who set aside the tattered bedtime stories he usually read to his son and began making up a new wild tale each night, to their mutual delight; the church administrative assistant who broke with tradition and routine and for the first time in her years of service, pushed back from her desk, walked down the long corridor to the executive office, and shared some new ideas with her boss.

These are only a few of the stories I hear regularly in more than twenty years of working with adults in both organizational and classroom settings. While I have long appreciated the power of improvisation principles to spark creativity in the arts and business, these reports and my observations told me that this was only one aspect of their value. Clearly something much more subtle and mysterious was in motion—something that had very little to do with me as the facilitator and everything to do with what adults experienced as they learned improvisation. What, I wondered, was actually happening for these people in this co-created space? And what, if anything, did their various stories of transformation have in common? What other spaces support this kind of engaged experience that delivers people to expanded creative capacities and new, more positive self-beliefs?

It's Not Like Work

To answer these questions, I designed an in-depth study of eight adults' experiences as they were learning improvisation and their reflections on their learning and transformation several months

after the course ended (Meyer, 2006a, 2006b, 2009a, 2009b). As I began researching these adults' experiences, I noticed that even before they could tell me what *was* happening for them or what their experience was like, they were able to tell me what it *wasn't* like: work. In contrast to the constraining, rule-bound, enervating experiences that often characterized their workdays, they described the space they co-created for improvisation as energizing, free from judgment, and a place where they could be themselves.

It was tempting to rationalize that it is easy to create this kind of environment in a facilitated setting and that it is different in the "real world"; it was even briefly tempting for me to feed my own ego and believe that I had some magical power to create this environment. However, I only needed to look beyond my classroom to my client sites and to other organizations that generously opened their doors for this inquiry to know that such spaces for dynamic engagement are possible and exist in many organizations, work groups, and training rooms. Unfortunately, they are the exception rather than the rule of organizational life.

As you will read in this book, these spaces, although they are rare, do exist across businesses, industries, government, and arts organizations. They exist in organizations that are highly regulated, as well as those that are high pressure and fast-paced. They exist in organizations that are well funded, as well as in those that make creative use of limited resources.

Naming the Space

In my original research (Meyer, 2006a, 2006b, 2009a, 2009b), I used the term *learning space* to describe the engaged environments that many credit with their experiences of significant learning, transformation, and expanded creative capacities. The term seemed appropriate because the experiences I was researching first occurred in a literal learning space, a classroom, and because many of its dimensions related to learning and transformation. The term *learning space* also has some history in

adult learning theory (Englehardt & Simmons, 2002; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Yorks, 2005) that has informed my thinking and confirms some of my own findings.

More recently I have found the term *learning space* to be constraining; it tends to focus only on the learning within the space and obscures the many other important dynamics, including creative collaboration and the capacity to respond to and initiate positive change. Each of these dynamics often involves new learning, and learning itself is not always the entry point, motivation, or most prized outcome of the kind of dynamic spaces that people describe as “not like work.”

Through a series of conversations with colleagues, clients, friends, and students, I discovered, somewhat chagrined, that I was avoiding the obvious: what is most not like work in our Western-socialized consciousness is play. I was avoiding calling the space *playspace* for the very reason it *had* to be called that: the spaces we create that allow the play of possibilities, fresh ideas, perspectives, and emergence of new capacities as we play new roles are counter to our view of what the workplace is supposed to feel like. When people experience playspace and, more important, experience themselves and each other in playspace, they describe being energized, inspired, and even astonished with themselves.

For this reason, this book has been titled *From Workplace to Playspace* because in order to create such spaces in innovating, learning, and changing, we must first make a fundamental mind-set shift *from workplace*, with all of its constraining connotations and habits of mind, *to playspace*, and the dynamic engagement it fosters.

Acknowledgments

The best part about researching and writing about playspace is that I got to engage with thoughtful and creative fellow players who helped create the playspace to incubate, explore, and develop the ideas, concepts, and practices that fill this book. They include dear friends, passionate colleagues, and curious thinking partners and mentors. Among them are Rita Balzotti, Frank Barrett, Cate Creede, Christian Kern, Danny Mittleman, Allison Morgan, Nancy Nickel, Michelle Sanford, Steve Schapiro, Carol Semrad, Jeremy Shapiro, Cheryl Small, Mari Pat Varga, Tiffany Von Emmel, and Donna Younger.

A special thanks to my colleagues and students at DePaul University, School for New Learning, and the Center to Advance Education for Adults, whose courage to create spaces for learning and transformation has taught me much and has allowed me to see what is possible in playspace. I also thank the research participants who generously shared their descriptions of playspace with me, the individuals who agreed to share their experiences and best practices of playspace in their organizations, and my client organizations that daily recommit to making playspace for innovating, learning, and changing.

More gratitude to Brandy Agerbeck at Loosetooth.com, with whom I have collaborated regularly over the years; she is a gifted graphic facilitator and valued thinking partner. Brandy created the playspace icons, first to represent my individual research participants and now, in this book, to communicate the dimensions and dynamics of playspace. I thank her for permission

to include her work throughout the book and in the cover design.

The homestretch of any creative process is a delicate balance between the life of the process and the demands of deadlines and production. The editorial team at Jossey-Bass is particularly adept at this and deserves special thanks for their guidance, expertise, and capacity for creative collaboration, especially my editor, Kathe Sweeney, and her editorial assistants. Thanks, too, are due to my agent, Esmond Harmsworth, who helped make this fruitful match.

All “new” work is an evolution or extension of the work and contributions of those who have gone before, often laying the essential foundation in which more ideas can take root and grow. Although this is not intended as a scholarly text, I have done my best to create a road map between my conception of playspace and others who have contributed to or are working in this area. At times, in the interest of flow and concern for the reader’s patience, I have leaped over some of these contributions. In the spirit of playspace, I ask for your understanding and also welcome your input and thoughts as the theory and practice evolve.

Introduction

This book is about visionary, courageous, innovative, persistent, and, yes, sometimes playful organizational leaders, facilitators, and participants who challenge long-held preconceptions about the incompatibility of workplace and playspace. In the face of their stakeholders', competitors', and sometimes even their own employees' and colleagues' claims that their approaches were risky, inappropriate, and even "corny," they forged ahead. You will read of a small community bank in the Northwest that overtook all competitors in its home market, of the "most entrepreneurial department" in the third largest public school system in the United States, of a high-end manufacturer that decreased its product development cycle by more than half while increasing profits, of an apparel company that harnessed the power of social networks for exponential growth, of a nonprofit theater company that has sustained its ensemble and innovative mission for more than twenty years, and the two-person start-up that grew to be an Internet giant and continues to create space for the play of new ideas with its more than ten thousand employees worldwide.

No one calls these organizations corny today. Nor do they dismiss the efforts their leaders, facilitators, and participants make each day to create space for the play of new possibilities and discovery. They no longer tell them that "serious businesspeople don't play." Because of the results these organizations deliver and their capacity to respond to unexpected challenges and opportunities, those who once rolled their eyes at organizations

that value playspace now want to know what they are doing that makes them consistently outperform their peers and regularly land on such coveted lists as Forbes 100 Best Companies to Work For.

What's Their Secret?

The organizations and the individual stories of transformation described in this book all have one thing in common: a shift in mind-set from workplace, in which the product is more important than the process, to playspace, where the lively, creative process of innovating, learning, and changing invites passionate commitment and enthusiastic participation. In playspace, people are free to take on new roles, experiment with new perspectives, and loosen their grip on tried-and-true ways of thinking and being. There is room in playspace for individuals to risk stepping out of their comfort zone, to see and be seen differently, and to make new discoveries.

Playspace reclaims the very word *play* to open up more room for new ways of thinking and being. Playspace is the space for more play in the system, the play of new possibilities and perspectives, for people to play new roles and develop new capacities, as well as space for improvised play. When we reconceive innovating, learning, and changing as play, we breathe new life into these processes and create the very space needed to ensure that they thrive.

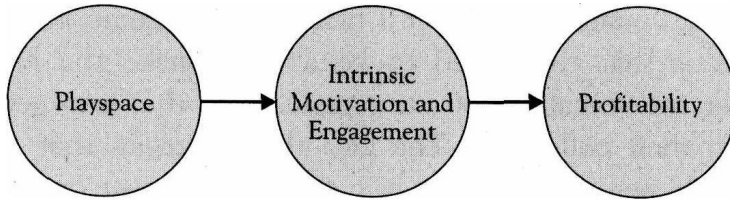
Playspace helps organizations get results. The pace of change in everything from technology to consumer tastes is only increasing, along with the pressure of fluctuating global economies. In these conditions, responsive and innovative action is key. Such action is possible only where there is space for it—not constrained, routine, and habituated space but open, dynamic, and creative space. Playspace allows us to think creatively, question old assumptions, respond effectively to the unexpected, and engage all participants' talents in collaboration.

The Business Case for Playspace

The most common challenge I hear from organizational stakeholders is that they need to be able to make the business case for the so-called soft strategies before they can get buy-in from their colleagues. The idea that strategies that engage the whole person are soft, while those that target operational aspects of organizational life are worthwhile, overlooks the very core of organizational success—the living, breathing people who must fulfill its mission each day. Without engagement, without playspace for innovating, learning, and changing, the best that organizations can hope for is compliance. Unfortunately compliance is not enough to ensure organizational success. People do not challenge each other's ideas, explore alternative scenarios, or persevere through complex issues and obstacles out of compliance; they do so out of commitment (Senge, Roberts, Boss, Smith, & Kleiner, 1994).

Commitment is fostered by engagement, and engagement is fostered in playspace. A study conducted by Patrick Kulesa (2006), global research director at Towers Perrin, of 664,000 employees from around the world showed a significant difference in the business success of companies in which workers were highly engaged and those with low engagement scores. Their research showed a 52 percent gap in operating income between high- and low-engagement companies, a 13 percent growth in net income for high-engagement companies versus a 3.8 percent decline in low-engagement companies, and a 27.8 percent growth in earnings per share for high-engagement companies versus an 11.2 percent decline for low-engagement companies. There is a direct link between spaces that inspire high engagement and profitability.

Organizational innovation, learning, and change also thrive when there is room for whole-person engagement. When we create playspace for intrinsic motivation and engagement, these business outcomes follow: decreased turnover, increased job

Figure I.1. Playspace to Profits

satisfaction, improved net income and earnings per share, to name only a few of the findings cited here. While it is sometimes hard to draw a straight line between whole-person, whole-systems approaches to organizational development, we can link playspace to intrinsic motivation and engagement and, in turn, these core dimensions to organizational success (see Figure I.1).

Organizations across industries and with wide-ranging missions are discovering that playspace is the space they can and must create every day at work if they are to think creatively, question old assumptions, respond effectively to the unexpected, and engage all participants' talents in collaboration. Each of the organizations profiled in this book, as well as the individual stories of transformation, support the need to balance innovation, learning, and change strategies with a commitment to playspace. There is not one yardstick by which to measure these organizations. The Chicago Public Schools department profiled in Chapter One measures its success by the number of new gifted and magnet programs it offers, the number of students served, and annual learning progress; other businesses take their employee satisfaction scores seriously and their ranking on Forbes 100 Best Companies to Work For, while watching their market share and shareholder value grow; the small arts organization measures its success in its ability to sustain a thriving creative ensemble and provoke its audiences' thinking decades after many of its peers have closed their doors. What these organizations have in common is their ability to sustain their success by creating playspace.

Descriptions, Not Prescriptions

It is often easiest to detect the presence of a magnetic field by the patterns of metal filings created in response to its forces. Similarly, playspace is most easily identified by the behaviors and experiences of those who co-create it; however, those behaviors and experiences alone are not the playspace, any more than the movement of the metal filings are the magnetic force. The outward representations of the energy in the system can alert us to the presence of dynamic power; however, if we mistake the movement or outward manifestations for the energy itself, we may assume that simply recreating the outward appearances of playspace will create the more illusive dynamic of the space itself. For this reason, here, and throughout the rest of this book, I warn of prescriptive approaches to playspace. One can no more prescribe a specific approach that works in all organizations than prescribe one way to fall in love that fits all relationships. The illustrations and examples offered throughout this book are not intended as prescriptions but as provocations that might inspire new ideas and approaches that fit your organization.

A Holistic Approach

Scholar-practitioners can locate playspace in holistic management approaches, where the organization is viewed as a complex social system. While much of the theoretical lineage of playspace theory and practice has been omitted here for ease of reading, students of organization and management theory will see the link between playspace and interactionist views of creative behavior and organizational creativity (Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993); whole-person, organizational, and transformative learning (Cranton, 2006; Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999; Mezirow & Associates, 1990; Yorks, 2005); and organizations as dynamic systems (Daft & Weick, 1984; Gergen, 2002; Hatch, 1993; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Tannenbaum, Marguies, & Massarik, 1985).

A whole-systems view of organizations acknowledges that we can name various dimensions and levels of the system, such as the individual, team, department, region, organization, structure, policies and procedures, and culture. However, if we attend to only one dimension without engaging the whole system, our attempts at bringing out the best in the organization will fail. This book takes a whole-systems view while concentrating on the dynamics that are within the span of influence of its leaders, facilitators, and participants.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is for people who feel a need for more engaging, collaborative, and creative spaces in their organization and want to be more successful at innovating, learning, and changing. They have seen glimpses of the potential in their organizations and know they can do better. They are managers, executives, and internal and external training and development professionals. They are also educators and facilitators working with adults in businesses, universities, government, health care, and community organizations. This book is also for organizational participants who play many roles in the organization and may or may not have a formal position of authority but care about working (and playing) in ways that fully engage their talents and allow them to discover and develop new capacities. These participants are also willing to share responsibility for co-creating this experience for themselves and their colleagues.

You should read this book if you care about making space for creative collaboration and significant learning and transformation because you have had glimpses of them in your own experience. You have worked on projects where everyone was contributing at the top of their talent and was appreciated for their perspective. You have enjoyed facilitated learning environments that challenged your thinking while stretching your skills in a supportive setting. You have worked in organizations where

everyone felt that they could be themselves and where they were able to discover new capacities and develop competence and confidence in ways they couldn't have imagined. This book is for all people who know these spaces are possible and are frustrated that they are so rare. This book is for people who know it is possible to consciously and consistently co-create such engaging playspaces and understand they are the key to their success.

Overview

Chapter One describes the mind-set shift that *From Workplace to Playspace* invites. Beginning with the reclamation of the word *play* itself as core to organizational success, Chapter One shows how playspace comes to life in the process of innovating, learning, and changing. The dynamic engagement in playspace is described as one of increasing individual awareness, acceptance, and appreciation in action.

Chapters Two through Six show how leaders, facilitators, and participants are bringing playspace to life in their organizations every day. Each of these chapters highlights a different organization and describes how it is engaging a key dynamic of playspace. The facets of the dynamic are illustrated, followed by how they manifest in the creative processes of innovating, learning, and changing. The second half of each of these chapters provides coaching sections for leaders, facilitators, and participants that illustrate ways their counterparts are bringing the playspace dynamic to life in their organizations. The five dynamics of playspace described in Chapters Two through Six are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. When brought to life by committed leaders, facilitators, and participants, they make space for new possibilities, perspectives, and positive change to thrive. Chapter Seven surfaces a number of the themes and best practices of organizations that sustain playspace and consistently create it in their conversations, collaborations, learning, and strategy sections.

Reading for Resources and Reminders

Once you have read *From Workplace to Playspace*, you will find the closing sections of each chapter useful for examples and ideas to energize and revitalize playspace in your organization. These sections are designed to serve as quick references and will be useful to refresh your thinking and inspire your own approaches. You may choose to read only the sections that pertain to the role or roles you are playing at any given time on a team, collaboration, learning, or idea-generation session. The index will also lead you to situational references, such as “coaching,” “toxic players,” and “social networks” that can guide and inspire your thinking and approaches. Finally, the chapter summaries are intended as a quick refresher to reinforce your commitment and daily co-creation of playspace.

I also invite you to visit playspace.biz to continue the conversation with others who are making space for innovating, learning, and changing through dynamic engagement and take advantage of additional resources to support your success.